

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11425170

THE ROLE OF THE CAP SAC RITUAL IN SHAPING PERSONAL IDENTITY AMONG THE SAN CHAY PEOPLE IN THAI NGUYEN, VIETNAM

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Received: 11/11/2025

Accepted: 18/12/2025

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the impact of the Cap Sac initiation ritual on the formation of individual personality and community character among the San Chay ethnic group in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam. It also draws comparative insights from similar coming-of-age ceremonies practiced by other ethnic minorities to highlight the unique characteristics of the San Chay ritual. Using a qualitative research methodology that integrates field observations, interpretive analysis, and in-depth interviews with ritual masters, participants, and community representatives, the research reveals that the Cap Sac ritual is not merely a religious activity but a powerful cultural-educational space. It plays a vital role in imparting moral values and cultural knowledge, fostering personal qualities such as responsibility, discipline, perseverance, ethics, and gratitude. Simultaneously, it strengthens communal values such as solidarity, harmony, mutual support, and the preservation of traditions. As a distinctive form of intangible cultural heritage, the Cap Sac ritual functions as a cultural core in preserving ethnic identity, maintaining generational continuity, and guiding moral behavior among youth. Thus, it contributes significantly to building sustainable communities and safeguarding the cultural heritage of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

KEYWORDS: Personal Character; Ritual Role; San Chay People; Cap Sac Ritual; Thai Nguyen, Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the 2019 Population and Housing Census in Vietnam (as of April 1), the San Chay ethnic group has a total population of 201,398, ranking 14th among the 53 officially recognized ethnic minority groups nationwide. The San Chay people are sparsely distributed and live interspersed with other ethnic groups across several northeastern mountainous provinces, such as Tuyen Quang, Thai Nguyen, Bac Giang, Quang Ninh, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Phu Tho, and Vinh Phuc. The San Chay are composed of two local subgroups: the Cao Lan and the San Chi. While the Cao Lan speak a language belonging to the Tay-Thai group (under the Tai-Kadai language family), the San Chi speak a language from the Sino-Tibetan family. Historical records suggest that the San Chay migrated from China to Vietnam approximately 400 years ago.

In Thai Nguyen province, the San Chay represent the fifth-largest ethnic minority community, with 39,472 individuals-accounting for 19.2% of the San Chay population nationwide. They are primarily concentrated in the districts of Phu Luong, Dong Hy, Dinh Hoa, and Dai Tu. As a culturally rich community, the San Chay have preserved many distinctive traditions, among which the Cap Sac ritual stands out as a practice imbued with profound spiritual and cultural significance.

The Cap Sac ritual of the San Chay shares certain similarities with coming-of-age ceremonies observed among the Dao and Nung ethnic groups. However, it also contains unique elements, particularly in terms of the ritual space, the central role of the ritual master (shaman), and the sequence of rites performed by the initiates. Though not frequently practiced, the Cap Sac ritual maintains a crucial role in shaping individual character and reinforcing community cohesion. Elders in particular place great value on preserving this ritual as a means of maintaining cultural identity and ensuring generational continuity. As such, traditional ritual practices like Cap Sac are essential to the cultivation of both individual personality and communal life.

Several previous studies have explored the concept and function of ritual in various cultural contexts. Lan (2018), in her work "Do Rituals Exist? Definitions and Classifications Based on Belief Theory", argued that rituals do not necessarily require normative or standardized forms, but rather emerge from shared belief systems, behaviors, and communal attitudes throughout the ritual process. Grimes (2013) outlined fundamental components of ritual such as actions, agents, time, space, objects, language, and participating communities,

emphasizing that rituals encapsulate belief, morality, and cultural values. Similarly, Summers-Effler (2006) highlighted the emotional and aspirational dimensions of ritual, asserting that rituals evoke emotions, create meaning, and foster hope among participants.

Other studies have approached rituals through specific cultural lenses. For instance, Ellisa and Azharia (2020), in their research on the KaSa'o ritual in Tololela village, Flores (Indonesia), emphasized the role of ritual in expressing hospitality and promoting cultural tourism. Aça (2023) reaffirmed the importance of ritual in preserving the identity of communities facing the loss of their native languages. While these studies stress the role of ritual in sustaining belief systems and cultural resilience, few have focused on the role of ritual in shaping individual personality and identity within communities.

To investigate the impact of the Cap Sac ritual on individual and social identity within the San Chay community, this study builds upon foundational works such as Rossano (2012), who argued that ritual behavior plays a central role in transmitting and reinforcing social norms. According to Murdiono et al. (2017), adherence to these norms is a key indicator of moral character within society. Additionally, studies by Dermawan & Sholikhati (2019) and Nelson-Becker & Sangster (2019) have emphasized that ritual serves as a foundational framework in shaping individual behavior throughout the life cycle, enabling individuals to confront future challenges.

These studies reveal that traditional rituals are not merely cultural practices but essential tools for transmitting values and shaping personality. Through ritual, participants interpret life events and establish attitudes based on cultural reference systems. As an intangible cultural heritage, the Cap Sac ritual offers profound insights into community identity and plays a pivotal role in the formation of youth character. It integrates behavioral norms and moral models, helping to guide conduct and strengthen social cohesion.

In addition, recent studies on intangible cultural heritage provide further insights into the preservation and transmission of rituals. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) emphasizes the importance of community participation, intergenerational transmission and the adaptability of rituals in contemporary contexts. Recent Southeast Asian studies have also highlighted the dynamic ways in which ritual knowledge is transmitted

within minority communities. For example, research on Len Dong – Spirit Journeys in Contemporary Urban Vietnam (Ngo, 2009), and Traditional Festivals in Southeast Asia: Unity in Diversity (Nguyen, 2025) demonstrate how rituals serve as cultural anchors in rapidly modernizing societies. Incorporating these perspectives allows us to situate the San Chay Cap Sac ritual within a broader regional discourse on heritage preservation and identity formation.

Based on this framework, the study poses two central research questions: (1) How does the Cap Sac ritual influence the process of individual personality formation among the San Chay in Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen? And (2) How does this ritual contribute to shaping community identity and social values? This is the first dedicated study to explore the relationship between the Cap Sac ritual and personality development among the San Chay in Thai Nguyen. Field data were collected through the observation of the ritual in Dong Keu village, Phu Dinh commune, Dinh Hoa district. The findings confirm that ritual practices profoundly influence individual thought, behavior, and lifestyle, while the preservation of traditional rituals is essential to the protection and promotion of cultural heritage. This study also provides valuable materials for scholars interested in the cultural practices of the San Chay ethnic minority, contributing to the preservation of ethnic identity and the transmission of cultural values to future generations, while also laying the theoretical groundwork for future studies in ritual anthropology and cultural studies.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ritual is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon that plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing communal values, social norms, and individual personality development. The theoretical framework of this study draws from foundational theories on the nature of ritual practices, transitional stages in rituals, their social functions, and their roles in individual development. These perspectives collectively provide a solid analytical foundation for examining the multifaceted significance of the Cap Sac ritual within the San Chay community.

2.1. Characteristics Of Ritual

Ritual is commonly defined as a sequence of symbolic actions performed according to prescribed norms and imbued with specific cultural meanings (Bell, 1992; Rappaport, 1999). Core characteristics of ritual include symbolism, repetition, communality, liminality, and sacredness. Symbolism allows for the

transmission of profound meanings connected to a community's worldview and value system, ensuring cultural continuity across generations. The communal aspect of ritual enhances social cohesion, while liminality marks significant transitional moments in both individual and collective life. Thus, ritual is not merely a formal event but an essential vehicle for the transmission of spiritual and social values.

2.2. Victor Turner's Theory Of Rites Of Passage

Building on the concept of liminality, Victor Turner (1967, 1969) developed Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, emphasizing ritual as a dynamic process that facilitates transformation in both individual and social life. Turner introduced two key concepts: liminality—a transitional, ambiguous, and transformative phase; and *communitas*—a state of egalitarian solidarity that emerges during liminal periods. During the liminal phase, individuals temporarily step away from their previous social roles and undergo cognitive and social transformation, leading to the emergence of a new identity. In the San Chay Cap Sac ritual, this transformative process is expressed through strict teachings, symbolic trials, and ritual performances, during which initiators transcend adolescence to enter adulthood and receive formal social recognition.

2.3. Émile Durkheim's Theory Of The Social Function Of Ritual

Émile Durkheim (1912) viewed ritual as a foundational institution that maintains social order and reinforces collective consciousness. According to Durkheim, ritual reproduces shared values and transforms abstract norms into tangible experiences in everyday life. Through ritual participation, individuals internalize community values and develop a sense of belonging and responsibility, thereby contributing to social cohesion and cultural continuity. In the Cap Sac ritual of the San Chay, this function is evident through broad community participation and symbolic acts that affirm cultural identity. The ritual helps initiators understand their social roles and responsibilities while reinforcing collective ethnic solidarity.

2.4. The Role Of Ritual In Personal Development

From a psychosocial perspective, ritual serves as a structured environment for personality formation. The theories of Erik Erikson (1950) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) emphasize the importance of social context

and cultural participation in shaping the self. Rites of passage, in particular, provide a structured space for individuals to learn, internalize societal expectations, and construct identities linked to tradition. Values such as responsibility, self-discipline, loyalty, and communal consciousness are cultivated through this process. For the San Chay, the Cap Sac ritual functions not only as a social transition but also as a critical environment for cultivating essential moral qualities and affirming official membership within the community.

2.5. Vietnamese Perspectives on Ritual and Ethnic Identity

In the context of Vietnamese scholarship, many researchers have contributed significantly to understanding the socio-cultural meanings of minority ethnic rituals. Notably, Nguyen Tu Chi (1996) argued that ritual serves as a mechanism for affirming social order and enhancing communal cohesion among ethnic minorities. He emphasized that the Cap Sac ritual is not merely a religious act but a comprehensive system encompassing cosmological, social, and ethical dimensions. Through such rituals, individuals are integrated into the cultural universe of their community and undergo transformation on both social and moral levels.

This theoretical framework offers a comprehensive foundation for examining the multifaceted role of the Cap Sac ritual within the San Chay community. It clarifies the dialectical relationship between traditional ritual practice and the process of individual personality formation, while simultaneously revealing how ritual practices both reflect and construct social life and cultural identity within the context of ethnic minority communities and a multi-ethnic nation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, grounded in hermeneutic interpretation and an emic (insider) perspective, to explore the inherent meanings and cultural logic of the Cap Sac ritual as perceived and interpreted by the San Chay community. The research was conducted in a naturalistic setting, emphasizing direct observation and immersive participation to elucidate the values and functions of this traditional ritual practice.

The study has two primary objectives: (1) to describe and identify the fundamental characteristics of the Cap Sac ritual as practiced by the San Chay community in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam; and (2) to analyze the meanings and roles of the ritual in

shaping individual personality and communal values.

3.1. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, unstructured interviews, and document review. Fieldwork took place over five days (from December 11 to December 15, 2024) in Dong Keu village, Phu Dinh commune, Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen province. The researcher actively participated in and observed the entire ritual process, recorded field notes, conducted video and audio recordings, and engaged in informal conversations with participants, including ritual masters, initiates, and community elders.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted over a period of five days. While this timeframe may appear limited in relation to the complexity of the Cap Sac ritual, we sought to address this constraint through a combination of methods. We combined direct observation of key ritual sequences with participation in the preparatory stages alongside community members and preliminary discussions about the ritual's meanings. In addition, we employed methodological triangulation: (1) conducting multiple in-depth interviews with ritual specialists, elders, and participants during and after the ceremony; (2) cross-validating our observations with secondary ethnographic accounts and historical records of the San Chay community; and (3) engaging in comparative analysis with Cap Sac practices documented among other ethnic groups, such as the Dao. This integrative approach compensated for the brevity of the fieldwork and provided a sufficiently robust empirical basis for a comprehensive understanding of the ritual.

Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather local perspectives on the personal, social, and cultural meanings of the ritual. The discussions focused on topics such as:

- Personal beliefs, expectations, and emotional responses during the ritual process
- Social concerns related to work, relationships, and status
- Values associated with the ritual, such as responsibility, discipline, and intergenerational continuity

This approach allowed for in-depth, flexible data collection, providing participants the freedom to express their experiences and cultural knowledge in their own terms.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis focused on three core dimensions:

- The ritual structure and symbolic system of the Cap Sac ceremony
- The ritual's role in fostering individual personality traits (such as discipline, responsibility, perseverance)
- The broader social functions of the ritual in reinforcing community cohesion and cultural identity among the San Chay

The interpretive dimension of the analysis extended beyond verbal accounts to include symbolic elements of the ritual, such as the role of the ritual master, spatial arrangements, ritual offerings, and performative aspects including chanting, offering, and transformational actions.

3.3. Ethnographic Comparative Perspective

In addition to primary field data, the study incorporated a comparative ethnographic perspective by examining Cap Sac rituals of other ethnic groups, particularly the Dao and Nung in Dong Hy district, Thai Nguyen. Secondary sources and field reports were used to highlight similarities and differences, thereby emphasizing the unique structural, symbolic, and socio-cultural features of the Cap Sac ritual among the San Chay.

4. RESEARCH SITE AND RESPONDENTS

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Dong Keu village, Phu Dinh commune, Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen province. This site was deliberately selected based on three key criteria:

- The majority of residents in the hamlet belong to the San Chay ethnic group;
- The Cap Sac ritual was revived and organized here after more than a decade of discontinuation, marking a significant restoration of a traditional cultural practice;
- The ritual was performed in its traditional format, drawing broad community participation and reflecting the local commitment to preserving cultural identity.

4.1. Selection Of Key Informants

The study utilized purposive sampling to identify individuals directly involved in or closely connected to the ritual process. Qualitative data were collected from nine key informants representing diverse roles in both ritual structure and community life: Master

Hoang Van Binh – the most senior ritual practitioner, aged 81, with extensive knowledge and experience of ritual traditions; Masters Tran Phuc Truong, Tran Van Bac, and Hoang Van Khiem – mid-generation ritual masters playing central roles in leading and conducting the ceremony; Master Tran Phuc Hong – the youngest ritual practitioner, aged 36, representing the next generation of ritual knowledge bearers; Mr. Bang Van Hong – an initiate (referred to as tro), aged 39, who participated in the ritual as a formal step into adulthood; Student Tran Phuc Luong – the youngest initiate, born in 2008, is currently a Grade 11 student at Binh Yen High School; Ms. Tran Thi Nhat – Secretary of the Party cell in Dong Keu village, offering insight into the community's cultural perceptions of the ritual; Ms. Tran Thi Thoan – a local resident and active participant in the event.

These informants provided valuable perspectives on the meanings, symbols, and impacts of the ritual on both individual and community life. Their varied roles enabled the construction of a comprehensive picture, integrating both emic (insider) and social-functional viewpoints.

4.2. Broad Community Participation

Beyond the key informants, the Cap Sac ritual also drew participation from a wide array of individuals, including 13 young male initiates, local officials at commune and hamlet levels, and many residents from Dong Keu and neighboring villages, communes, and districts. This large and enthusiastic turnout underscored the role of the ritual as a cultural community event, contributing to identity affirmation, strengthening social ties, and ensuring intergenerational continuity.

4.3. Findings And Discussion

4.3.1. Key Features Of The Cap Sac Ritual Among The San Chay

1. Purpose and Meaning of the Ritual

Although the overall structure of the Cap Sac ritual resembles initiation ceremonies practiced by ethnic groups such as the Dao and Nung, it holds distinct meanings and purposes within the cultural context of the San Chay. For the Dao, Cap Sac is a mandatory ritual for all men, marking spiritual adulthood and conferring the right to perform ancestral worship. The Dao perceive the Cap Sac ritual as a spiritual "rebirth," wherein the initiate receives a sacred name bestowed by deities. The certificate granted during the ceremony serves as a kind of "metaphysical passport," enabling the soul to return to the ancestors after death. Those who have

not undergone the ritual, regardless of age, are still considered “children” in the spiritual realm and are not eligible for transcendence.

For San Chay men, the Cap Sac ritual is not only a manifestation of spiritual authority but also a declaration of personal strength, a marker of community recognition, and a means of sustaining core cultural values. These interpretations were confirmed through testimonies from fifteen initiates who participated in the 2024 ritual in Dong Keu village, Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen province.

2. Ritual Space

Traditionally, the Cap Sac ceremony is held in the central chamber of a San Chay stilt house, where altars to Nam Hoa (vegetarian offerings), the Jade Emperor (meat offerings), and agricultural deities are arranged. During the ritual, the space is transformed into a sacred realm. As the ceremonies unfold, the entire structure—including the roof, floor, and household items—seems to resonate with the rapid, rhythmic movements and intense energy of the ritual. This spatial transformation, accompanied by chants and the pounding of ceremonial drums, creates a spiritual field that radiates through the house, producing a multisensory experience unique to the San Chay—unlike similar rituals among other ethnic groups.

3. Duration and Structure

The Cap Sac ritual among the San Chay typically spans five to seven days, with three main sessions per day: morning, afternoon, and evening. This extended timeframe differs significantly from the Dao or Nung rituals, which are usually held over two continuous days and include night sessions. The San Chay’s spaced-out scheduling allows participants to rest and absorb the teachings gradually, emphasizing sustainable moral training over condensed spiritual intensity.

4. Offerings and Symbolic Elements

Ritual offerings in the San Chay Cap Sac ceremony are generally simpler than those of the Dao, Tay, or Nung groups. Common offerings include rice, meat, fruit, incense, votive paper, bundles of rice stalks, and strips of white cloth. Notably, many offerings are presented only after the ceremony concludes, reflecting a pragmatic spiritual logic in which effectiveness is prioritized over formality.

Offerings are made to multiple spiritual entities: the Earth Deity, the Jade Emperor, ancestors, and agricultural gods. The offerings for the ritual master’s home altar include sweets, fruits, incense, votive paper, and a bag of rice. During the Cap Sac ceremony itself, offerings are often limited to a bowl

of rice, a white cloth strip, incense, and votive silver ingots (sometimes shaped like rooftops). The offering to the Earth Deity typically includes three boiled chickens, sliced pork, rice wine, votive money, a bowl of rice, and a bowl of cooked rice. The offerings to the Jade Emperor and divine generals include the same items, while the altar to the agricultural god receives a pig’s head, a bowl of rice, and silver-shaped votive paper. Rice, in particular, is an indispensable symbolic item representing fertility, gratitude for the land, and reverence for agricultural deities. Through the rice, the ritual master is believed to transmit sacred energy to the initiate and invoke divine protection.

Sacred symbolism plays a vital role in the ritual, with representations of the Three Pure Ones (Tai Qing, Yu Qing, Shang Qing) and the Four Marshals (Dang, Trieu, Ma, and Quan Marshals) reinforcing the sacredness and legitimacy of the ceremony.

5. Participants and Taboos

The Cap Sac ritual involves ritual masters (thay) and initiates (tro), and is typically conducted in groups of 12 to 15 initiates. Each master is responsible for guiding about 3 to 5 initiators. This group-based format distinguishes the San Chay ritual from the more individualized ceremonies of other ethnic groups. Initiates are usually aged 16 and above. While not required to be married, most have basic knowledge of Chinese characters and ritual scriptures.

Participants must observe strict taboos before and during the ritual, including abstaining from dog meat, avoiding intimate contact with spouses, refraining from attending funerals, and not passing under tables or animal pens, in order to maintain ritual purity.

6. f) Ritual Process

Similar to the Cap Sac rituals of other ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, the San Chay ritual follows a strict, sequential structure composed of two main phases: the preparatory phase and the ritual performance phase. However, each ethnic group maintains its own distinct ritual features. For instance, among the Dao, the Cap Sac ceremony is heavily imbued with spiritual transformation, wherein the initiate is symbolically “reborn” into the spiritual realm and becomes capable of performing ancestral rites. In contrast, the San Chay’s Cap Sac ritual functions more as a “training process,” designed to prepare the initiate for the role of ritual master (thay) within the community.

The overall structure and sequence of the San Chay Cap Sac ritual can be outlined as follows:

Preparatory Phase: This phase includes the

following activities: 1- Presenting offerings at the master’s altar and the ancestral shrine; 2- Preparing ritual instruments and sacred objects (e.g., ceremonial books, ancestor scrolls, ritual swords, talismans, yin-yang divination tokens); 3- Journeying to the ceremonial site; 4- Erecting the ritual altar (hanging scrolls, making ritual flags, folding votive money, preparing bowls of rice, strips of white cloth, incense, and candles); 5- Placing offerings and petitioning the Earth Deity and local spirits for permission;

Ritual Performance Phase: This phase comprises a series of important ceremonial acts, including: 1- Summoning the spiritual generals (Thỉnh tướng); 2- Conducting the spirit possession rite (Phủ đồng); 3- Performing body inversion ritual (Lộn người); 4- Enacting spirit horse riding (Phi ngựa); 5- Mastering ritual hand seals (Học thủ quyết); 6- Opening the Heavenly Gate (Khai thiên môn); 7- Engaging in riddle exchange (Hỏi đố); 8- Lying upon the ritual rope (Nằm dây); 9- Transmitting sacred chants (Truyền âm); 10- Chewing ritual charcoal (Ngậm than); 11- Rolling through the fire bed (Lăn qua lò than); 12- Performing ritual purification (Khai quang); 13-Thanksgiving rites (a ceremonial offering of gratitude to sacred entities who presided over and sanctified the ritual process, including the Jade Emperor, spiritual generals, ancestral spirits, agricultural deities, and officiating ritual masters).

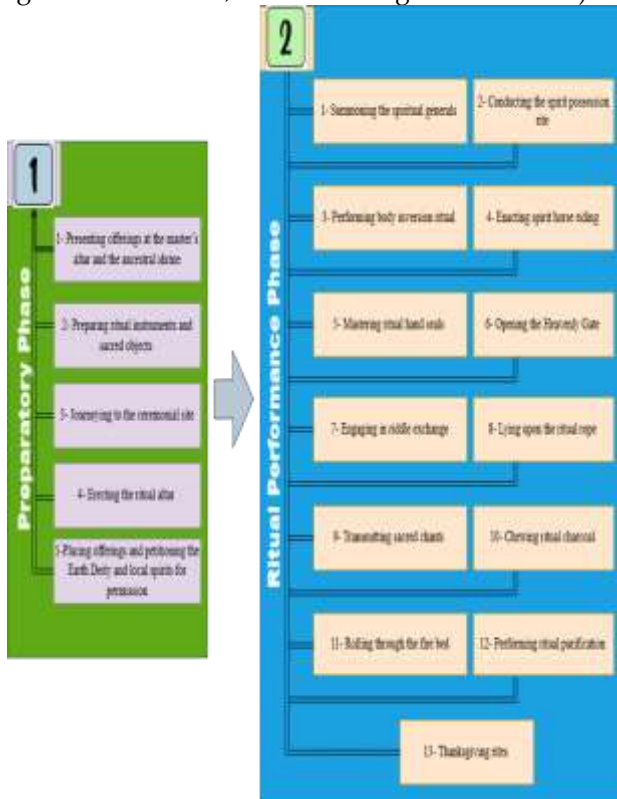


Figure 1: The Cap Sac Ritual Process.

At the conclusion of the ritual, the masters pack up ceremonial items such as scrolls, books, and sacred tools, while the initiates help clean the ritual space. The event ends with a communal feast (khao lang) offered to the villagers, during which the newly initiated individuals receive congratulations from the local community.

The structure and content of the Cap Sac ritual clearly reflect a distinct cultural logic: while many other ethnic groups emphasize metaphysical transformation and transcendence, the San Chay prioritize communal instruction, the affirmation of social roles, and the cultivation of collective responsibility. Accordingly, the Cap Sac ritual is not merely a spiritual event but a traditional process of moral training and communal education deeply embedded in the San Chay worldview and social organization.

The following figures, documenting various stages of the Cap Sac ritual performed by the San Chay community in Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, were collected by the author during fieldwork.



Figure 2: The First Step Of The Cap Sac Ritual, Where The Master Reports To The The Altar Of Master Cap Sac's House. This Action Initiates The Ritual, Consolidates The Master's Authority, And Highlights The Importance Of Formal Notification For The Legitimacy Of The Ceremony.



Figure 3: The Ritual Masters Set Up The Altar And Performs The Reporting Ceremony To Tho Cong, Marking The Formal Initiation Of The Ritual. This Step Reflects The Master's Communication With Spiritual Authorities And Reinforces The Ritual Hierarchy And Legitimacy Within The Community.



Figure 4: The Master Summons The General And Conducts The Spirit Possession Ritual, Channeling Spiritual Entities Into Participants. This Step Reinforces Ritual Authority And Highlights The Transmission Of Sacred Knowledge.



Figure 5. Participants Undergo Trials Lying On The Ritual Rope And Rolling Over Embers, Symbolizing Purification, Endurance, And Commitment. This Step Embodies The Transformative And Testing Aspect Of The Cap Sac Ritual.

4.4. The Role Of The Cap Sac Ritual In Shaping San Chay Personality

The Cap Sac ritual functions as a complex psychosocial mechanism that simultaneously facilitates individual transformation and enhances community integration. Drawing on Rossano's (2012) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the role of ritual in reinforcing social norms, the Cap Sac ceremony among the San Chay fosters and develops core moral and behavioral traits such as patience, discipline, perseverance, responsibility, communal awareness, and solidarity.

To be eligible for participation, San Chay men must demonstrate spiritual maturity-including possession of a ritual name (used in the spiritual realm), the ability to read classical Chinese, familiarity with sacred texts, and basic ritual knowledge. These competencies are often acquired

through self-study or apprenticeship with a ritual master. This requirement reflects both personal perseverance and the community's expectation of serious spiritual preparation.

One of the most physically and mentally demanding components of the ritual is the fire-walking test. Unlike the Nung, whose initiates merely walk barefoot across burning embers, San Chay initiates must roll their entire bodies through a bed of burning coals while chanting protective incantations and performing sacred gestures. This act serves both as spiritual purification and a powerful symbol of internalized resilience. All initiates who participated in the 2024 ritual in Dong Keu affirmed that this was the most transformative moment-an ultimate test of willpower and self-discipline.

Other repeated ritual actions over several days-such as trance possession, somersaults, riding spirit horses, and performing ritual hand seals-also serve as forms of intensive training, requiring the synchronization of body, mind, and spirit. These exercises are performed with closed eyes, deep breathing, and focused mental energy, gradually aligning the initiate with the rhythm of the ceremony. Such practices symbolize spiritual elevation and self-mastery.

Importantly, the ritual is not an annual event; it may occur only once a decade. As such, many participants are driven by a desire to continue family tradition. Mr. Bang Van Hong (age 39) shared that both his grandfather and father were ritual masters, and that undergoing the ceremony was both a form of ancestral continuity and a moral responsibility. This intergenerational transmission highlights that the ritual is not merely a personal spiritual act, but a sacred legacy passed from one generation to the next.

Throughout the ritual, initiates demonstrate respect for their teachers and collaborate in preparing offerings and ritual spaces. This reflects the values of cooperation, mutual respect, and collective responsibility-key elements of social cohesion. As Rossano (2012) suggests, communal rituals are powerful tools for reinforcing social bonds.

The ritual masters themselves must adhere to high ethical standards. They not only impart ritual knowledge but also serve as role models of compassion and spiritual leadership, strengthening emotional connections and communal unity within the ritual cohort.

The ritual is distinctly communal in nature, typically involving five ritual masters and fifteen initiates from various localities. This diversity necessitates coordination and fosters connections beyond village boundaries. Even among the masters,

mutual respect is evident. During the 2024 ritual, the eldest master (84 years old) conducted the most difficult rites, while the youngest (in his 30s) oversaw the overall process. This collaboration reflects the dynamics of cultural transmission and intergenerational solidarity.

Beyond the main ceremony, the wider community also plays a vital role: families prepare spaces and offerings, while local residents—young and old—participate with great enthusiasm, expressing pride and reverence. Women, though not formally trained in ritual theology, show deep respect for the ceremony and its practitioners. Ms. Tran Thi Thoan (age 62) remarked that the ritual brings good fortune, wards off misfortune, and that Cap Sac masters serve as moral and spiritual pillars for the entire community.

In sum, participation in the Cap Sac ritual is not only a spiritual obligation for the San Chay but also a cultural responsibility to preserve tradition, honor the ancestors, and seek communal well-being. The ritual marks not just spiritual maturity, but also serves as a vital medium for moral education, cultural transmission, and the strengthening of community bonds.

Victor Turner's (1969) theoretical model of liminality provides an important interpretive lens for understanding the Cap Sac ritual as a structured transition between social statuses. In the San Chay context, liminality is vividly manifested through physically and symbolically charged acts such as lying upon ritual ropes, chewing charcoal, or rolling through fire. These acts place the initiates in an in-between state—no longer adolescents, but not yet fully recognized as adult moral agents. The liminal space created by the ritual allows for deep psychological and social transformation, wherein the initiate internalizes new norms, roles, and expectations.

Turner's concept of *communitas*—a spontaneous and egalitarian bond formed during the liminal stage—is also highly relevant. Within the multi-day Cap Sac ritual, the initiates share living quarters, rehearse chants together, undergo the same symbolic ordeals, and rely on one another for emotional and logistical support. This temporary suspension of hierarchy reinforces peer bonding and creates a deep sense of belonging, which persists even after the ritual ends. In interviews, participants described a newfound sense of brotherhood and emotional closeness that they attributed directly to the shared ritual experience.

Durkheim's (1912) view of ritual as a mechanism for reinforcing collective consciousness is evident in

the way the Cap Sac ritual reaffirms shared values such as filial piety, respect for elders, and communal responsibility. Ritual acts—especially those performed in public, such as the final communal feast and collective offering—enable the group to witness, affirm, and internalize these values. The active participation of family members and neighbors in preparing spaces, making offerings, and encouraging initiates further amplifies the sense of moral solidarity.

From a developmental psychology perspective, Erikson's (1950) theory of identity formation highlights the importance of culturally embedded milestones in resolving psychosocial conflicts. The Cap Sac ritual serves precisely this role by marking a clear transition from youth to adulthood. Through overcoming fear, physical discomfort, and social scrutiny, the initiates emerge with a heightened sense of self-efficacy and responsibility. This structured rite allows them to integrate personal experience with communal expectations, thereby shaping a culturally grounded and socially affirmed adult identity.

5. CONCLUSION

The Cap Sac ritual of the San Chay people in Thai Nguyen is a deeply communal cultural practice that plays a crucial role in shaping both individual traits and social character. This ritual contributes to the education and cultivation of individuals with resilience, self-discipline, strong moral values, and a deep sense of community responsibility. At the same time, it serves as a sacred space where the San Chay community expresses reverence for their ancestors, maintains generational continuity, and safeguards the moral and spiritual foundations of their ethnic identity.

This study offers a new perspective on the relationship between traditional ritual and personality formation—a topic that has received limited attention in research on Vietnam's ethnic minority cultures. The findings demonstrate that the Cap Sac ritual not only preserves traditional cultural forms but also actively shapes the emotional, ethical, and spiritual lives of the San Chay community.

Based on these conclusions, cultural institutions and policy-makers in Thai Nguyen may consider integrating the Cap Sac ritual into educational and cultural preservation programs, particularly those aimed at youth and the sustainable development of heritage. First, the revival of rituals such as Cap Sac should be supported by local cultural departments through documentation, training of young ritual masters, and community-based events. Rather than museumizing these practices, support should

prioritize active transmission within the living community. In addition, responsible cultural tourism based on respectful observation of Cap Sac could provide both economic and cultural benefits, if designed with community leadership. Finally, this study reinforces the broader need to recognize ritual not only as heritage but also as an ongoing practice of ethical formation and social solidarity, vital to the resilience of minority cultures in contemporary Vietnam.

This study also serve as a reference for researchers

and practitioners in the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and ethnic education, contributing to the broader effort to recognize, protect, and promote the intangible cultural heritage of Vietnam's ethnic minorities.

The continued practice of the Cap Sac ritual-with its unique structure, symbolic depth, and active community participation-stands as vivid testimony to the enduring vitality of San Chay identity and the transformative power of traditional culture in contemporary life.

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